

**Art History
Supplement
vol. 1, n. 4**

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Art | Histories

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Editor:

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ISSN 2046-9225

Art Histories Society
www.arths.org.uk

AHS Editor:
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Printed in U.K.

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On the Paintbrush

by Agnolo Bronzino

I saw these days a good painting;
a man and a woman being nude,
having been painted together in a pleasurable act.
I found it lovely – a design worthy of its money –
for we see there is everything in it
that nature or the long studies can give.
I stood for a moment looking at it, carefully,
as a man who wasn't happy,
for it seemed to me I saw it wagging.
About this I was quick to deem
the brush, that made it, was worthy of praise;
if I were to praise it, I wish I had painted it myself.
Who is that man who enjoys not reasoning
for the things which this does alike,
born from a bristle or a tail?
There is no man or woman so savage,
who doesn't seek to have some of its things
or to have oneself painted from life.
There are those who are painted on the bed or in difficult
positions, standing up, or seated;

those who hold something in the hand and those who hide it;
those who want to be seen behind another;
those who want to be painted in front of another;
those who hold on; those who seem to fall.
I wouldn't know to count up to thousand and one
different actions and extravagant ways;
you know the variety pleasures everyone.
It is effectual to make it from behind or in front,
at a side, foreshortened or in perspective –
one the paintbrush uses for them all.
And it isn't between the christian arts more alive
than that in which one mixes with the paintbrush
wherever to nature comes the art.
Nor it needs in order to be learnt to have a bright mind
because if one hasn't it as big as his head
he, who teaches him, has, provided he wants to lay aside.
But the importance is that one steps out
or that one says, "Let one go, the one who wants;
I am going to poke", and wait to shoot.
Actions speak louder than words
and think of this art as the best way,
as it follows, to become one with floors.
I enjoy talking with you, or painters,
who seem by nature and take for fact
to have a great talent and strong and hard.
When you think you've worked well
don't look at it for strokes four,
because we never serve a thankless;
and keep in mind, when you sketch
either a woman or a man to paint them after
that you don't paint them in a bad manner;
as he says: "When you can
find a beautiful body, put it in a painting;
it's another thing to put it behind and you become it".
And don't bother if it's either below or above,
for it shows art and talent in all the ways
when the brush with a good look exerts itself.

When you hear someone else praising you,
don't vaunt yourself, don't take it for granted,
stay in the dark, be aware of time and modestly celebrate.
Thus, one who thinks that argue is needed
upon this matter to be more exact
and how quickly times goes by.
I believe it's better to die in bed;
I wanted to say to whom the paintbrush is needed
and till up to here I don't know if I've said it,
it doesn't matter if it's not well-bred, as long as it's more good-
looking;
sometimes in these cases the hill of Muses
is in the eye of the beholder.
But the man has to do with busts of certain heads,
and a tyrant never, indeed, hides behind a sign,
nor gives praise to others who arouse him nor finds excuses.
Yet it behooves me to sharpen my mind
and that I stay up to lift up my style,
if I want to paint these things I design.
O, housekeeper noble and gentle!
I do enter in a great field of thorns
and not in a great land as that one of Wisdom.
But, if I don't paint, I won't have a penny;
I have been found in a great ocean
even though I am not that strong as the oxen yoked up.
With what do kings, emperors,
nuns, abbots, donkeys and oxen come to existence?
With this alone, dipped in colours!
What can we leave behind us
that will help and support us
as this? Nothing as you could possibly imagine.
Take an example in chance: a woman dies;
if you paint or design her,
make her solely as good and with honour
O, blessed and unique item,
you make, like God, the world do round
sometimes and each time identically!

If I hadn't thought to design,
the scene with my rhymes, words and so on
wouldn't have remained, even if I had white hair.
It's better done with one thing only, as it's so much better;
and those who want it to draw with great talent
often believe it needs it and do it wrong.
But what can be more obvious and better sign,
and after that each one will know that your worth
has left almost the whole world teeming?
And, because I am, even I, still a painter,
I will make you to see which of these is a good
brush, the big, the medium and the small one.
Those which are short and thick are good in lay-out,
when it happens to work in gouache;
pay your attention to what I say.
But when others want to slenderise,
an appropriate paintbrush they need,
serving to that thing, one is to paint.
And you must always remember this,
that in the great and noble works
the brush wants to be of thickness,
provided that it is long and thin
folded in its toe and following the action
of being twisty, lazy and filthy.
I don't want to praise anyone working in any
manner, in which you must tease it for two hours,
if you want to use it for your own practice.
Nor in order to diminish the honour
of a good paintbrush; but even if it extends in broad,
it will not exist, when the candle is blown;
I would like to make you see it, whilst I cannot.

For the original consult Del Pennello: Agnolo Bronzino, *Rime in burla*, a cura di Franca Petrucci Nardelli, Roma, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, Bibliotheca Biographica, 1988.

A short interview with Martin Kemp

On the occasion of the publication of his new book, Professor Martin Kemp was happy to provide us a short interview.

His new book, *Christ to Coke; How Image becomes Icon*, will be launched on 27 October 2011 by Oxford University Press (Hardback | 352 pp | 165 colour halftones | 246x189 mm | TA 978-0-19-958111-5 | £25.00).

Question 1.1

Professor Kemp, could you please tell us, in short, what the double helix of Deoxyribonucleic acid, a Che Guevara and an American flag photo have in common apart from being well established icons?

The bald answer is that they have nothing necessarily in common – if we mean that there is there a central set of defining characteristics that must be present in all of them. If there were, I would be the world's biggest branding expert! But there are some characteristics that appear commonly in various sets and permutations in the most famous iconic images. These are: a renowned subject; a link to powerful factions or entities; a broad, rich and flexible set of associations; strong personal engagement; serving as the central image of a cult; a sense of presence that goes beyond its material existence; a measure of symmetry; simplicity of the main subject; tonal and colouristic clarity; robustness in the face of degraded reproduction; making good repeats; recognisable in fragmentary form. To explore

these telegraphic descriptions better, you'll have to read the book!

Question 1.2

Could such a consideration, by any means, imply that Panofsky's iconological theory could be applied to contemporary mass culture?

The tools of iconology and iconography can be applied to any visual product that carries some kind of allusive meaning, whether a Leonardo or the logos used to denote men's and women's toilets.

Question 1.3

More, what are differences between a symbol and an icon and what are, in general, the procedures one could become an icon?

An icon is an "image" (eikon in Greek), with all the potentially varied meanings and associations that it might carry. A symbol, at its clearest, exhibits a one-to-one relationship between its visual appearance and what it signifies.

Question 2.1

You came to Art History, if I am well informed, from a natural science background. Could you, please, speculate on what were the new insights you brought to the field?

There are two aspects to this. The first is that it inculcated a way of handling hypothesis, evidence and demonstration. Many arguments in the humanities are very sloppily handled. The second is that I came to regard the visual material generated by science as a natural part of the territory of a historian of the visual. For me there is a continuity in the spectrum of visual images generated in all areas of human activity. One of my mentors, Ernst Gombrich, gave us the license to place an advertisement for rotary shavers beside Raphael's Madonna della Sedia - or a spiral nebula. What we do with such juxtapositions is of course a demanding job for the historian.

Question 2.2

Did the work of Leonardo, itself, help you into this career change?

Not really. When I moved into art history I did not seek any relationship with science. It was only after graduate work at the Courtauld that I discovered Leonardo, who provided the best possible gateway into the science of art, which I found to be an intellectual territory of endless fascination and visual excitement.

Question 2.3

Further, I was wondering what you remember of Sir Anthony Blunt as a professional.

I recall him as very refined and rather remote - and slightly bloodless as a historian. Poussin, an artist of rhetoric and masks, seemed perfect for him - at least after his committed

Marxist-flavoured art history before the war. When he asked to see me at the end of my studies, he seemed to know a lot about me, which was a surprise. I was in his mental filing-cabinet.

Question 2.4

What Art History is? And what an art historian strives for?

Art History is, literally, the study of what has been called “Art”, either at the time of its production or by retrospective inference. However, I would personally prefer to use the term “Art” in a period sense. It now seems not to work well if it has to apply to a realistic portrait and a conceptual installation.

The art historian is concerned to tease out all those factors that went into the production of a work and all those factors that determine its functioning and reception. What these factors are thought to be vary according to the changing priorities of historians. Every historian does an incomplete and partial job. What I do is best described as the history of the visual.

Question 3.1

The so much expected Leonardo exhibition in the National Gallery, London will gather an extraordinary amount of Leonardo paintings, context and scholars, as advertised months before opening its door to the public, while having already created a certain essence with director’s decision to cut down the number of public in the rooms while extending the working hours of NG, L. I think we clearly speak of a blockbuster exhibition. Do you think this exhibition is addressed to the scholar, to the connoisseur or to certain publics?

Leonardo is the cultural figure who cuts across the widest set of cultural boundaries. I was, for example, interviewed for Ghana on the BBC World Service about the Mona Lisa. The Leonardo shows I have staged were intended to set up fields of viewing for specialists and non-specialists alike. I do not like the term “the public”. We are all members of various “publics”. I am a different kind of spectator looking at the Leonardo show in the V & A and at their Indian collection. Viewing “Art” is no longer an arcane or minority pursuit, and I have learnt never to underrate the people who travel to see exhibitions. The success of museums and art educators in creating viewer demand is both a demand is at once a source of delight and a problem. There are only so many people who can inspect a drawing or small painting simultaneously. Museums have to take into account the viewer’s experience and security (of the people and works of art).

Question 3.2

Besides, the “icon” of Leonardo itself is capable of floating an O2 Arena. What do you think is the main contribution of this particular exhibition to the science of Art History?

Art history is not a science, if we use “science” in its modern Anglo-Saxon sense.

The contribution of a major exhibition is not unitary. It is as varied as the spectators are varied. A good exhibition-maker provides information and shapes a visual experience but also allows the spectator space for their own ideas and imaginations to come into play.

Question 4.1

As someone who has seen (as I believe) the Mona Lisa in the Louvre outside of “her” glass cage, what do you think of Benjamin’s aura?

Benjamin had a habit of getting things wrong in a compelling and seductive manner, based on a priori assumptions. The reproduction of an “original” greatly increases its aura and draws increasing numbers or experience the presence of the “original”. It is amazing how we can sense the nature of the “original” even through degraded reproductions. This is one of the running themes in the book.

Question 4.2

Further, what you think of this particular way of exhibiting a painting – all alone, cutting “her” of her particular historical and cultural background and context? What would you think of an exhibition in Louvre, or elsewhere, revealing the way the painting Mona Lisa, or in fact any other painting of that era (religious or not), had been probably being displayed in the house of Francesco del Giocondo, for instance?

There is no definitely right way to display a work of art. I wonder how many painters groaned when their altarpiece went

into a penumbral chapel. Michelangelo's David was in theory intended for a high buttress on Florence Cathedral, but it was realised that it needed a different setting once it was completed. The portrait of Lisa del Giocondo, like a cluster of Leonardo's best-known paintings, remained with Leonardo throughout his life. Each context of display makes the painting "look" different around a central core of visual experience. One of the jobs of an exhibition is to provide visual contexts that present us with new insights. The current display of the Mona Lisa is determined by security, organising visitors and preventing it from "slaughtering" other pictures in the same room.

The conditions of viewing in present-day galleries is too unvaried and clinical – like bodies in a dissecting theatre. Artists new and know that pictures have different lives in varied viewing conditions.

Professor Kemp, thank you very much.

MARTIN KEMP FBA is Emeritus Professor in the History of Art at Trinity College, Oxford University. He has written, broadcast and curated exhibitions on imagery in art and science from the Renaissance to the present day; his many books include *The Science of Art*, *The Human Animal in Western Art and Science*, *Leonardo*, the prize-winning *Leonardo da Vinci*. The marvellous works of nature and man and most recently, with Pascal Cotte, *La Bella Principessa*, on the newly discovered Leonardo portrait.

Rethinking the Art-Craft Hierarchy: Assessing Critical Positions in Contemporary Ceramics

by Laura Gray

For some time the observation has been made that ceramics suffers from a lack of critical literature, and that art history has ignored ceramics because of a hierarchy in the arts that places craft, including ceramics, below the fine arts of painting and sculpture. Emma Shaw indentifies in the opening section of her PhD what she believes to be a gap in the literature available to the field of ceramics, ‘The lack of a critical and theoretical framework within ceramics and the crafts in general is widely acknowledged and there are few texts dedicated to the craft theory’[1]. However, the year that saw the completion of Shaw’s PhD also saw the publication of Glenn Adamson’s *Thinking Through Craft* (2007) and the start of a run of critically engaged craft publications. A decade prior to Shaw, Sue Rowley, in her introduction to the edited volume *Craft and Contemporary Theory* (1997), argues that ‘The so-

called “art-craft” debate of the 1980s can be understood as part of the broader critique of the notion of the canon in art, and as a challenge to the implications for craft of the canon-forming processes of art history...as Terry Smith argues in this volume, the canon of modern art was constructed around “anti-craft” values and the denigration of the crafts...’[2]. The sense of hierarchy in the arts clearly continues, even if it is no longer universally accepted. The persistence of this hierarchical thinking in the arts is perhaps unsurprising if we consider that the notion of a hierarchy in the arts stretches back to the Renaissance. In this hierarchy, developed by the paragone debates, painting and sculpture enjoyed an elevated status while the arts that involved manual work, and created ordinary things were relegated to a lesser position. The paragone debates compared the relative merits of paintings and sculpture and were, Ian Chilvers notes, an important part of aesthetic theory in the Italian Renaissance, ‘The foremost champion of the superiority of painting was Leonardo, who regarded it as a more intellectual art than sculpture...and he contrasted the way in which a painter could work in fine clothes whilst listening to music with the sweaty, noisy labour involved in sculpture’[3]. Similarly, the messy, visceral qualities of clay, and technical skill involved in working with the material, have arguably contributed to a distance between ceramics and the wider visual arts, and just as painting was considered the more intellectual pursuit than sculpture, so is sculpture considered to have greater intellectual substance than ceramics. The position that this article explores is that the gap between ceramics and fine art is not the gulf that has been suggested by some, and by taking a closer look at the critical literature that exists for ceramics, it is possible to move towards a greater understanding of the robust critical context that exists for contemporary ceramics. This critical context is not in stasis: it has been steadily improving over the last ten years, assisted particularly by the publication of a number of exhibition catalogues that contain highly engaged and informed essays analyzing contemporary ceramics practice. Many of these catalogues are closely linked to a small number of artists, writers and institutions, but they

have made a significant contribution to scholarship in this area.

As has been briefly mentioned above, Rowley, in the introduction to *Craft and Contemporary Theory* (1997) raises three central concerns to contemporary craft: the art and craft divide, the exclusion of craft from twentieth century art history, and the lack of theoretical engagement in writing on craft. Rowley argues that the art-craft debate of the 1980s is tied up with the implications for craft of the ‘canon-forming processes of art history’, in which ‘twentieth-century craft has either been excluded from history and critical study or transformed in the process of incorporation’[4]. Included in this is the idea that, ‘the canon of modern art was constructed around ‘anti-craft’ values and the denigration of the crafts’[5]. These three central concerns are present in much of the writing that exists on the crafts. In his essay ‘The Salon de Refuse?’ published in *The Culture of Craft* (1997), Peter Dormer suggests that craft is ‘intellectually inconvenient’ in modern and contemporary art, citing the example of the Bauhaus, where, Dormer argues, craftsmanship was acknowledged ‘but also down played as if it were an intellectually inconvenient fact of design history’[6]. The suggestion, made by Rowley, that there is a lack of ‘reflexive, theoretically informed dialogue’ at the heart of craft is also taken up by other writers’[7]. Howard Risatti in *A Theory of Craft* (2007) draws a comparison between the production of craft objects as well as the discourse that has surrounded them, which has ‘tended to focus on practical matters rather than on theoretical or critical issues’[8]. Risatti suggests that discussions of materials and techniques have dominated craft discussions rather than abstract, theoretical concepts[9].

On the other side of the debate Rosemary Hill’s essay ‘Writing About the Studio Crafts’ points to the presence of intellectual status in ceramics and the importance of Bernard Leach in establishing the ‘intellectual and artistic status of pottery’[10]. Hill suggests that Leach’s writing has informed a view in which studio ceramics are accepted as a branch of art ‘amenable to critical analysis, expressive of the individual personality of its creator’[11].

Furthermore, Hill suggests that ‘Leach more than anyone else established the studio craftsman as an artist moving naturally within the artistic and intellectual mainstream’[12]. Indeed, there are important instances when this idea of something approaching parity between ceramics and art in other media is achieved. One such example is the inclusion of British studio pottery in the 2011 Modern British Sculpture exhibition at the Royal Academy. The ability of the suggestion of function to separate ceramics from sculpture has recently been dealt a blow by this exhibition. Curated by Dr Penelope Curtis, Director of the Tate Britain and sculptor Keith Wilson, the exhibition included Sung dynasty dishes and twentieth century studio pottery by Bernard Leach and William Staite Murray alongside sculpture in one gallery.

Ceramics and Theory

Despite the presence of an ever-expanding strong critical literature for ceramics, there is some hostility to linking craft and ceramics to existing theoretical positions. Hill identifies certain types of writing as being within the Leach tradition of criticism, ‘journalism, certain kinds of essay, popular history’ and takes a position of hostility to existing theoretical positions, ‘Marxism has important insights to offer but it annexes the crafts to an existing intellectual system’[13]. This suspicion of using existing theoretical positions from which to consider craft has led to a weakness in the literature for craft and specifically ceramics. As Peter Dormer writes, ‘Craft and theory are oil on water. Because craft knowledge is expanded, demonstrated and tested not through language but through practice it makes it difficult to write about or even talk about with clarity and coherence’[14]. Brown addresses this issue with regards to ceramics, to some degree, in the essay ‘Theorising the crafts: new tricks of the trades’, published in *Craft and Contemporary Theory* (1997). Brown argues that ceramics as taught in universities is under threat as a discreet discipline, ‘The argument is that ceramics has proven a dense and inflexible medium of representation in the fine arts. Ceram-

ics, it would appear, has failed to build a role for itself as a transparent medium of representation. Ceramics must either mutate into something else, like “clay” as a subset of sculpture, or face extinction in universities’[15]. In the United Kingdom, though there have been some course closures, most notably the well-regarded ceramics course at Harrow, there is in fact a burgeoning postgraduate research culture developing for ceramics, furthered by the rise of practice-based PhDs and support for projects from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Brown’s essay does however serve as a reminder of an anxiety that has been present in ceramics for some time: that the best of ceramics will simply become co-opted into sculpture or the wider visual arts.

Howard Risatti, in his book *A Theory of Craft* argues that that ‘lack of critical ground is one reason why in the late Modern and Postmodern periods craft has been tempted to imitate the forms and methods of fine art’, and a result, ‘the search for an aesthetic theory that could provide a critical framework for understanding craft’s unique perspective on the world is abandoned’[16]. In the second part of his book Risatti focuses on a comparison of craft objects to works of fine art, setting out to refute the argument that there is no significant difference between art and craft, and the related implication that current fine art aesthetic theory applies equally well to craft as well as to fine art. Risatti suggests a definition that clearly separates art from craft, ‘fine art is about perceptions and appearance; it always exists within the realm of the subjective. Craft is about physical and material function; hence, it always exists within the realm of the objective’[17]. Acknowledging the gap between his stance on the relationship between art and craft and that held by other scholars in the field, Risatti rejects the view that meaning resides outside the object, blaming literary criticism, specifically reader-response criticism, for this approach[18]. Risatti also argues that it is ‘Changes in the way function is understood in contemporary Studio Craft’ that have helped blur the line between craft and fine art, and prompted questions about the limits and boundaries of craft[19]. In this age of the expanded field for ceramics, when artists work-

ing in clay use ephemeral, site-specific, installation-based and time-based ways of working, it is interesting to note pockets of continued resistance to bringing the framework of art criticism to bear on craft or indeed, specially on these types of works. What Risatti suggests should be said about such works is unclear.

Comparisons Between Ceramics and Sculpture

Ceramics, when compared specifically to another medium is frequently considered in relation to sculpture. Both ceramics and sculpture are concerned with the manipulation of plastic form and three-dimensional objects existing in space. These fundamental commonalities give rise to an interest in the further similarities and differences that unite and divide the two disciplines. To talk of a sculptural ceramics, has in general been to talk of something large and abstract, a non-functional, or without reference to the functional, work in clay. The term has helped to demarcate territory, implying a difference of artistic value exists between functional and non-functional ceramics. However, there exists in contemporary ceramics practice clear ground where ceramics and sculpture share references, ideas, form, and character, though the nature of the relationship also remains ambiguous, a struggle to define. What is certain is that ‘sculptors are not only using clay but some of the ideas and idioms that are part of ceramics history’[20]. An exhibition, *The Raw and the Cooked*, held at Modern Art Oxford in 1993 sought to explore the relationship between ceramics and sculpture. That same year Martina Margetts wrote an article for *Crafts* that set out some of the ideas that provided the conceptual underpinnings of the exhibition, which she and Alison Britton has curated. In ‘Life After Leach’, Margetts argues that ‘from the 1950s (in terms of modern art) the notion of ceramics as a form of sculpture was accepted’[21]. Margetts points to the 1980s as the start of a new period of convergence between ceramics and sculpture, ‘The sculptures of Richard Deacon, Bill Woodrow, Tony Cragg, Anthoni Gormley, Alison Wilding and

Anish Kapoor, in particular, have a close affinity with figurative and vessel forms, presenting objects as metaphors'[22].

This continued affinity between ceramics and sculpture has continued to be a strand in the thinking on contemporary ceramics. Glenn Adamson invoked this relationship in 2008 when writing of the work of Anders Ruhwald,

'Ruhwald's work speaks the language of sculpture adroitly, with a subtle mastery of art historical reference, psychological affect and formal gesture. Given this the question inevitable arises: does it matter that his work is always made of clay? This is not to ask if these objects are best seen as art or craft – it is obvious that they are both, and unproblematically so – but whether they derive their meaning from their materiality in any important way, and therefore, whether they should be taken as an intervention into the field of contemporary craft'[23].

The notion of the presence of the language of sculpture in ceramics practice is often invoked in writing on the work of Edmund de Waal, whose understated shelves of white porcelain vessels invite comparisons with sculptural minimalism. Writing about de Edmund Waal's work *Listing*, Listing Jorunn Veiteberg makes an association between this piece and both the conceptual art of the 1960s, when lists first gain serious ground as 'anti-aesthetic' artworks[24]. Donald Judd's stack pieces are also a natural reference point for *Listing Listing*, a work comprised of eight short white shelves placed one above another, and populated with simple porcelain vessels of various sizes. Despite the formal resonances between the work of Judd and de Waal, Veiteberg makes clear that the differences between the two artists are as important as their similarities. Veiteberg argues that while Judd maintained a clear distinction between art and design, furniture and sculpture when de Waal uses these sculptural forms as shelves, he not only does away with this opposition, he also opens a whole new world of associations[25]. De Waal has himself written about the relationship between ceramics and sculpture for *Ceramics*

Review. In the article ‘Significant Form?’ de Waal gets to the root of the tendency in ceramics to call a work ‘sculptural’ if it is simply not a vessel, suggested that the word is becoming an unconvincing ‘coded adjunct telling us that ceramics of a particular nature are important and significant’[26]. In this article de Waal argues that ‘sculptural ceramics’ is a phrase that is now so widespread that it seems ‘gratuitous to ask in what ways ceramics can share the ground of sculpture’[27]. De Waal suggests that rather than counting the various different ways in which those working in ceramics have used the word ‘sculptural’ in association with their work, it may be more useful to engage with how sculptors have used ceramics. De Waal argues that the gravitas in great sculpture lies partly in its ability to change the space we share with it, ‘to make us more aware of our own corporality, to challenge or console us, to extend the language of materials’[28]. This understanding of sculpture as changing space is seen in the writing of Krauss, and over the following decade was addressed by de Waal himself in many of his works that sought to articulate architectural space through the careful placement of vessels.

Conclusion

Addressing the historical precedent of intellectual thought in ceramics, this article seeks to demonstrate that claims relating to the gap in the critical literature for craft, and ceramics in particular, are exaggerated. Claims for the presence of an intellectual void at the heart of craft can be seen as linked to a rise in hierarchical thinking about art and craft - which has sought to position craft as distinct and removed from the concerns of the wider art world - that has persisted, and at times strengthened, during the twentieth century. Risatti argues that craft needs a critical framework of its own that can further understanding of ‘craft’s unique perspective on the world’, but fails to explain why craft can’t access critical discourses that already exist, discourses that are used in literature, as well as cultural studies, film studies and

across the humanities. Risatti's stance is problematic as he fails to sufficiently account for why craft cannot sit at this table when so much else can. If it is possible to draw on the same critical ideas to analyze a play by Shakespeare or a film by Godard, why should craft require a completely separate discourse? The implicit turning away from critical thinking that this stance suggests has led to the pervasive idea that there is a dearth of critical literature for craft, whereas fine art seems to have been more open to using extant critical discourses. A truer reading of the situation regarding the critical literature for ceramics is that there is in fact a substantial amount of critical writing, but much of it is hidden in out of print exhibition catalogues, books that were printed in small numbers and are difficult to access, and back issues of journals that are increasingly less available to physically reference in libraries. Mining these sources reveals a wealth of literature that can provide a strong foundation for the continuing development of criticism for ceramics in the expanded field.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank James Beighton, Senior Curator at Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, for his assistance with this article, and also my PhD supervisor Dr Jeffrey Jones, Reader in Ceramics at Cardiff School of Art, for his ongoing support.

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[9] Risatti, 2007, p.15.

[10] R. Hill, 'Writing About the Studio Crafts', in P. Dormer, editor, *The Culture of Craft*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997, p.190.

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[12] Hill, 1997, p.191.

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- [18] Risatti, 2007, p.255.
- [19] Risatti, 2007, p.289.
- [20] E. de Waal, 'Significant Form?', *Ceramics Review*, no. 176, 1999, p.34.
- [21] M. Margetts, 'Life After Leach', *Crafts*, no. 123, 1993, p.20.
- [22] Margetts, 1993, p.23.
- [23] G. Adamson, 'Open Ended Objects', in J. Beighton and A. Ruhwald, editors, *Anders Ruhwald - You In Between*, Middlesbrough, Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, 2008, p.62.
- [24] J. Veiteberg, 'Visual Essays', in E. De Waal, J. Veiteberg, H. Waters, *Edmund de Waal at Kettle's Yard, MIMA, and elsewhere*, Cambridge, Kettle's Yard & MIMA, 2007, p.13.
- [25] Veiteberg, 2007, p.13.
- [26] De Waal, 1999, p.34.
- [27] De Waal, 1999, p.34.
- [28] De Waal, 1999, p.37.

Jannis Kounellis in the Sphere of Alchemy

by Steve Pantazis

Unquestionably, there is a connection between art and alchemy, since alchemical references are found in Western art, as in the Renaissance, 17th century and recently in Modern, Postmodern and Contemporary art. In the art of the 1960s, for instance, there are allusions to alchemy particularly in the works of the Italian Arte Povera, which appeared in the artworld towards the end of the decade. Arte Povera, literally translated from the Italian as ‘poor art,’ is characterized by the use of humble and basic materials[1] in order to create an elemental and anti-elitist art, focused on the point where nature and culture, art and life meet, through the combination of industrial materials such as metals, glass and cloth with organic materials such as live animals, earth, fire and vegetables.

Faithful to the principles of the group and loyal to Postmodernism’s standpoint[2] is one of its prominent figures, the Greek-born artist Jannis Kounellis. His paintings and installations feature found objects and diverse materials such as fire and smoke, doorways and windows, mounds of coffee grounds and coal, the use of live animals and the participation of people, transforming his art into a breathing entity, adding a performative dimension to his installations. Most importantly however, his art springs

from the mixture of materials and ideas that are both ancient and modern and are also strongly connected to his own personal memories. Every material he uses is not randomly selected, but holds within various meanings and symbolisms that he can carefully manipulate in order to achieve the result he has envisioned. He employs materials that can acquire different meanings, depending on the context in which they are used, and he is not afraid to re-process them, combining them in such ways that each time his creation procures a fresh and different substance. The prominent quality nonetheless is an attitude towards history and tradition. His materials thus carry the weight of history and emerge as inherent components of the cultural past.

Since the 1960s, we find in the works of Kounellis references to alchemy due to the incorporation of alchemical materials such as fire, gold, black metals and lead. In this article, I intend to present some examples of Kounellis' work, which have elements and ideas associated with alchemy, and through them to explain the reasons why he is attracted to it, based on comments and observations of art historians and critics and on Kounellis' interviews and writings. It is crucial to highlight at this early stage that alchemy has inspired rather than influenced Kounellis. In his case, it is important to use the term inspiration or to talk about similarities because, in different interviews and talks and especially during our meeting at Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro in Milan in 2006, he rejects the assumption that his work has been purely the result of an influence, an attitude equivalent to that of other artists who deny links with any sources,[3] but argues that all stimuli work together unconsciously leading to the moment of inspiration.[4] Studying the sources of his inspiration, meaning tradition, history and memory, is important. Through such analysis we may reach the starting point of the artwork, obtain insights of the creative processes and the imagination of the artist, illustrate how culture and the past, from where alchemy derives, work their way into the piece and how originality is achieved, as Göran Hermerén maintains in the book *Influence in Art and Literature*. [5] Additionally, the term inspiration is more suitable

in the case of Kounellis, since it speaks of creativity and multi-dimensionality of his work, meaning that the artist incorporates ideas and materials from different periods that carry multiple interpretations.

We come across this multiplicity of interpretations in his works in the different essays on Kounellis, as well as in his own replies during the interview in Milan, where when I offered my own interpretations to some of his works, he always replied ambiguously, implying that every version could be acceptable. Thus, the works examined in this essay show the connections with different artists and movements and are based on associations that different experts and the artist himself have made or in some cases have been governed to a certain degree by personal understanding, since most of the art produced in the 1960s is characterized by its openness to a variety of readings. This plethora, as it has been argued in Umberto Eco's *Opera aperta* (1962), is based firstly on the artists' desire to open the artwork to a plurality of interpretations and secondly, on the viewer who as:

the individual addressee, reacting to the play of stimuli and his own response to their patterning, is bound to supply his own existential credentials, the sense of conditioning which is peculiarly his own, a defined culture, a set of tastes, personal inclinations and prejudices.[6]

Every viewer appreciates the works differently, carrying his own cultural background and taste, thus the work becomes 'open' in the sense that he 'modifies' what has been given by the artist and takes with him his own impressions and interpretations.

Is Kounellis an 'Alchemist'?

Even though Kounellis uses materials connected to alchemy, he does not give clear answers on this subject. For example, in the catalogue of his solo exhibition organized by the Museum

of Contemporary Art in Chicago in 1986, Thomas McEvilley mentions that the artist rejects any alchemical readings of his art in contrast to later interviews.[7] In the meeting at Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro, when I asked him if his art is connected to alchemy, his response was not very straightforward indeed. At the end of the conversation he said:

To say that art is not alchemy is wrong; to say that it is only alchemy is unfair. Everything has alchemy within it, but it is not alchemy that pushes you to create. What pushes you is to find the code. For me, my exhibitions are a matter of life.[8]

Figure 1: Giovanni Kounellis , Stage Design for Wagner's Lohegrin, 2002 © DACS, London 2011.

In another interview regarding his theatrical settings for Wagner's Lohegrin in 2002, he stated that he felt like a sort of an 'alchemist' (Figure 1).[9] The setting was associated to alchemy, since, according to Stephen Bann, the author of the book Janis Kounellis, who attended the performance, "[n]othing more suggestive of alchemy could be imagined than the very gradual blossoming of the grey iron screens to an intense golden hue under the spotlights."[10] From these reactions of the artist we can infer that he does not create works directly inspired by the secret science but that in them we can detect symbols related to it. For him, alchemy is a metaphor from where he can obtain symbols such as fire, gold and dark metals and according to Kenneth Baker:

Kounellis like several other arte povera artists including Giuseppe Penone and Gilberto Zorio tries to instigate ways of thinking that transcend the materialistic hostility to metaphor, the oppressive dominance of empirical thought that determines our experience of the awful inertia and trajectory history.[11]

A stand, as Baker continues, similar to the goal of alchemists which is:

the liberation from the laws, hierarchies, and dualities of mundane reality. The emblematic alchemic operation is the transmutation of base metals into gold, which is conceived as the perfect state towards which they tend in the supreme order of things. [12]

In other words, these artists' aim is to elevate and transform basic materials into art, in the same way that alchemists aimed at the transformation of base metal into gold. Andrew Causey suggests that Kounellis like the other Arte Poverists "recalls the pre-scientific world of alchemy, when science and religion had not yet been fully distinguished," by using "the alchemist's contrast of base metals and gold, with fire as an element that gives a sense of charge and metamorphosis." [13] McEvilley in his essay writes that Kounellis' use of gold, lead and fire is associated to alchemy. But according to the author, Kounellis' interest in alchemy must be understood as "a secular, humanistic alchemy that does not mean to escape history but to celebrate it." [14] McEvilley's observation is accurate since in the interview in Milan, Kounellis remarked, "[t]he subject in my works is not alchemy, but my effort to move away from the canvas. I am interested in alchemy as a product of the past." [15] Kounellis is drawn to alchemy, as Jean Frémon also argues, as it is part of the history of our culture, [16] found in the visual arts and literature of the past. Nevertheless, the incorporation of fire, gold and other materials associated to alchemy, giving a magical touch to his art, is free "of any Surrealist leanings," [17] since Kounellis rejects any associations of his art to that of the Surrealists. [18] He is not interested in exploring alchemy as the Surrealists, who, according to M.E. Warlick, were interested in "breaking the stranglehold of reason on the human imagination," [19] but instead, he incorporates alchemical symbols as products of history since he is an artist who believes that the present is built on

the past and tradition.

In general, Kounellis' art is situated at the crossroad where the innovations of the art of his generation meet history, tradition and memory. His materials, ordinary but instilled with dramatic power, evoke all of these things and the reality of present day experience as well. Tradition is widely defined, in our time, as an inherited pattern of thought or action, passed from generation to generation.[20] For Kounellis however, tradition acquires a more intricate and organic character, best described by T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," representing a historical timelessness, meaning a fusion of past and present, but which at the same time lays the groundwork for innovation. Novelty in art does not happen in a vacuum. Instead, according to Eliot, it alters the structure of the existing arrangement and leads to a readjustment of the old to accommodate the new.[21] Originality can be attained by different routes, but for those artists who have something to offer, the process lies in discovering themselves "by a progressive absorption in, and absorption of, and rejection (but never a total rejection) of other [artists]."[22] In many of Kounellis' works, we find symbols and fragments of history and myth since he is interested in expressing his belief that the present or the future, do not contradict the past, because the past is usually hidden in the future.[23] He believes that every person should be interested in tradition in order to have a better present or future. More specifically, he said: "Tradition does not mean adoration of the past, but it is the need to reorder actions in order to have a present." For example, in numerous works the artist incorporates different parts of a classical sculpture, representing a moment in history (antiquity) where rationalism, harmony and totality existed (Figure 2). The incorporation of broken pieces of classical sculpture shows his interest in fragmentation. In his view, innovation in Postmodern art should be achieved through the assimilation of fragments of the past, since European society has fallen to pieces after World War II, a theory first conveyed in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) by Theodor Adorno (1903-1969).

Figure 2: Kounellis Giovanni, Untitled, 1973 © DACS, London 2011.

It is important to note that Kounellis began including alchemical materials in his art in the late 1960s. Kristine Stiles explains that:

Kounellis, like many artists of his generation, responded to the political turmoil of the 1960s by abandoning painting and creating installations that included found objects, musical and performative components, and alchemical elements (earth, fire, water, air).[24]

During the late 1960s, when political and cultural changes occurred – such as the protests against the Vietnam War in the US and the UK, the civil rights and environmental movements, sexual liberation, the feminist and hippie movement, the students' and workers' demonstrations in France – we see people and particularly artists turning towards unorthodox religions, the occult and alchemy. This generation felt betrayed and had the urge to find alternatives outside the Christian faith and rational thinking. [25] This urge is exemplified in a graffiti written on the walls of Paris: "THE IMAGINATION TAKES POWER/ TAKE YOUR DESIRES FOR REALITY/ IT IS FORBIDDEN TO FORBID." In the catalogue Beuys, Klein, Rothko (1987), we come across this observation, where Anne Seymour suggests that in post-war European art we detect the significance of "Eastern religions, philosophical, scientific and occult writings, myth and shamanism." [26] Also, it is important to note that in the mid-1960s, a substantial body of research began to form on abstract art and its association to occult and mystical beliefs, such as Sixten Ringbom's and Robert P. Welsh's studies on Wassily Kandinsky's (1866-1944) and Piet Mondrian's (1872-1944) involvement

with Theosophy,[27] two important figures for Kounellis, since he mentions them in writings and interviews. In more detail, the art of a number of Minimalists in the US has been related to mystical thought; thus Frank Stella's black paintings suggest mandalas and his tantric has been interpreted as the result of his attraction to non-Western ideas. Even though the artist stated in 1964 that "what you see is what you see,"[28] his art has been associated to mystical thought, since his interest in Celtic illumination has been documented while being an undergraduate student at Princeton.[29] Also, in Europe this interest in alchemy, the occult and unorthodox religions, is expressed as we will see, in the art of the French Yves Klein and the German Joseph Beuys, who incorporate alchemical signs in their works.

During this period, we come across associations between art and alchemy in the works of Giuseppe Penone, Mario (1925-2003) and Marissa Merz. For instance, around 1967, Mario Merz began introducing common objects such as umbrellas, raincoats and bottles integrated with shafts of neon light which, according to the artist, transformed them alchemically.[30] In the essay "Arte Povera," Germano Celant, the leader of the group, compares the artists' activities to those of the alchemists' and specifically writes, "The artist-chemist organizes living things in magical ways,"[31] meaning he uses materials of industry and nature or the human body as the basis of his art. Urszula Szulakowska also highlights that it was mostly German and Italian artists:

who were the main adherents of 'alchemical arte povera' in which art made out of the debris of society underwent a transformation at the hands of the artist into a high cultural artefact with the power to cause a spiritual or cultural change of consciousness in the viewer.[32]

The artist liberates "his entire culture by means of an artistic ritual"[33] by transforming poor and humble materials into art.

This interest in spiritualism, alchemy and the occult may have also derived from the fact that the Arte Poverists tend to celebrate history and tradition in their art, since we find alchemical symbolism in different periods of Italian art, such as the Renaissance and the Baroque. Also, this tendency may have been stimulated by the fact that in the second decade of the 20th century, there was a strong fascination with mysticism and the occult among the Futurist artists and writers.[34] For instance, Giacomo Balla's (1871-1958) *Iridescent Interpenetration*, 1914 and Gino Severini's (1883-1966) *Spherical Expansion of Light* series, 1913-14 (Figures 3-4) are based on the notion of the transparency of bodies that was essential to Futurism and can furthermore be connected to photography and to occult ideas about the invisible.[35]

Figure 3. Giacomo Balla, *Iridescent Interpenetration*, 1914 @ DACS, London 2011.

Figure 4. Gino Severini, *Spherical Expansion of Light (Centrifugal)*, 1914. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2011.

Finally, it is important to note that since the 1960s, the artist in general is considered to have 'alchemical' or magical powers, since art became a metaphor of an 'alchemical ritual', causing cultural transformation.[36] For instance, Beuys was considered the shaman of the arts, as a result of the self-declared purpose of his work, which was to heal society. Kounellis has stated that "art is the elixir of life," [37] and by incorporating alchemical symbols and other fragments of history, where harmony and totality existed, he tries to discover the measure of the future for the best of society. According to him, in order to achieve the new measure for social unity, which "is not a particular cultural element – not a certain kind of constitution or religion or uni-

fied educational tradition...” but “...an indefinable inner commensurability that prevails among all elements and aspects of a system,”[38] the artist must realize that he belongs to history and thus must express contemporary concerns of humanity and raise questions. As McEvelley comments, “this is a kind of sacred duty to the artist – though its sacredness is comprised of its secular and historical value.”[39]

Alchemical Materials

In many of Kounellis’ works we notice the use of fire, which for him symbolizes punishment, necessary for the being to transform for the sake of society.[40] This approach to fire is pre-Socratic, since many of the basic ideas of alchemy developed among the Greek philosophers. For instance, Heraclitus of Ephesus claimed that fire alone was the principle of all things. [41] McEvelley argues that Kounellis’ idea of justice is similar to the Ancient Greek philosopher Anaximander’s, who said that “each thing yields justice to the totality by being transformed back into the whole. Transformation into what one is not balances the one-sidedness of what one was and constitutes justice or necessity.”[42] McEvelley mentions in his essay that “fire is like a metaphysical principle in its connection with destruction, process, and change.”[43] Jamey Gambrell suggests that Kounellis’ fire becomes a comment on “traditional connotations of ritual purification, its cleansing properties.”[44] Likewise, Sandler says that his flames are associated to “the alchemist’s flame, the spark of life, social transformation, a destructive power and so on.”[45] For instance in ‘Margerita’ (figure 5), a hissing gas flame being released from the centre of a flowerlike shape metal, fire represents the route of social and cultural change through which society grows or collapses as one measure is destroyed by the fire, and from the mouth of the flower another measure is coming out.

Figure 5 Giovanni Kounellis, *Untitled (Margerita)*, 1967 © DACS, London 2011.

Figure 6 Giovanni Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1969 © DACS, London 2011.

In one of his “bed” works made in 1969 that includes a wire-sprung bed with gas-bottle and lighted blow-torch (Figure 6), Jon Thompson offers a different association to alchemy through the theories of the French philosopher and historian of science Gaston Bachelard,[46] whom Kounellis has read. [47] Thompson observes in the piece:

[an] intense atmosphere of erotic isolation...[which] immediately puts one in mind of Duchamp’s melancholic statement in the notes of the *Large Glass*: “The bachelor grinds his chocolate himself”...Where Duchamp lays stress on the auto-eroticism implicit in bachelorhood, Kounellis is just as insistent about the poetic energies which can arise out of sexual isolation.[48]

The metal bed frame with the flame seems like a torture device where the “eroticised body” as a sacred unity is “sacrificed.” Kounellis has created a bed, for a man who prefers to live alone and as a result “experience[s] the gathering momentum and violent force implicit in male sexual desire.”[49] We can identify the bed as ‘masculine’ because of the lighted blow-torch. In particular in his writings referring to the practices of alchemy, Bachelard argues that “[m]asculine fire, the object of meditation for the lonely man, is considered to be the most powerful fire. In particular it is the fire which opened bodies.”[50] Furthermore, he notes, “[a]rt in imitation of nature, opens a body by means of fire, but uses a much stronger fire than the fire of confined flames.”[51] This last quote means that a work of art is not something passive but in contrast, according to Thomp-

son, it has the strength to alter the way we think, feel and relate to the world,[52] similarly to fire, ‘the great transformer’ in the alchemical sense. In Kounellis’ ‘fire’ pieces, fire stands for creativity of the human spirit, which lasts as long as there is even a small and weak flame. In the case of his ‘smoke’ works, such as the first he exhibited in 1969 with traces of smoke ‘placed’ on steel shelves (Figure 5), where fire is implied, they last for as long as the smoke traces, the ‘negatives of fire,’ remain on the gallery walls and are further engraved on the memory of the viewer.[53]

Kounellis is interested in fire because it is the most ambivalent and forceful material that can become a symbol of numerous processes.[54] According to Bachelard,

Fire is the ultra-living element. It is intimate and it is universal. It lives in our heart. It lives in the sky. It rises from the depths of the substance and offers itself with the warmth of love. Or it can go back down into the substance and hide there, latent and pentup, like hate and vengeance. Among all phenomena, it is really the only one to which there can be so definitely attributed the opposing values of good and evil. It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell. It is gentleness and torture. It is cookery and it is apocalypse. It is a pleasure for the good child sitting prudently by the hearth; yet it punishes any disobedience when the child wishes to play too close to its flames. It is well-being and it is respect. It is a tutelary and a terrible divinity, both good and bad. It can contradict itself; thus it is one of the principles of universal explanation.[55]

Bachelard’s approach is relevant to that of the Ancient Greeks, who saw in fire two opposite identities: the Destructive Fire associated to Hades, the god of the underworld and death, and the Creative Fire, associated with Hephaestus, the god of craftsmen. Fire has a dual substance: it can give birth and destroy; it can warm up and burn; it can illuminate and blind; and above all it

can be creative and destructive. Kounellis' 'fire' pieces, as we have seen previously, on the one hand, last as long as the fire is 'living,' but on the other they live longer since the fire is smoldering in the fuel storage tank and is ready at any time to externalize its vehemence. Fire, in the words of the alchemist Joachim Poleman quoted by Bachelard, is no longer "on the surface...no longer external, but internal and incombustible." [56] It is this fire/energy living in the center of each thing that Kounellis wants to present, utilize and manifest. [57] *Untitled*, 1973, where Kounellis stands in front of a metal plate and a flame 'comes out' from his own mouth (Figure 7), must be seen as a gesture of internal strength since the artist is 'vomiting' his genius. [58] In front of these works – where the flowing fires are "like rivers" according to Kounellis, quoting Heraclitus [59] – the viewer experiences the simultaneous power and beauty of fire and feels the physicality and actuality of it, since he can experience the sound and the heat of fire. [60]

Figure 7 Giovanni Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1973 © DACS, London 2011.

These 'fire' pieces bring to mind a number of Yves Klein's works based on fire, influenced by Rosicrucianism, which was built on alchemical doctrines. In 1947, the artist read Max Heindel's *La Cosmogonie des Rose-croix*, written in the early 1900s, contemporaneous with Rudolf Steiner's *Occult Science*, who also wrote about Rosicrucianism, [61] and practiced its teachings with his close friends Claude Pascal and Arman. [62] Heindel and Steiner believed that at some point in the third millennium, humans would be able to escape materialism and become more spiritual and sensible. [63] At the end of 1960, Klein started to create works related to fire, one of the four elements of alchemy. [64] For example, his exhibition at the Museum Haus Lange in Krefeld included his *Fire Fountain* and *Fire Wall*, his fire drawings and paintings. He was interested in the alchemist's fire be-

cause he wanted to draw the public's attention not only to the fire's light but also to the effect of the burning.[65] Furthermore, for his work *Tableau de feu*, 1961 (Figure 8) the artist said:

I was at once able to envisage the immense possibilities of the Ultra Living element. If all that changes slowly is explained by life, all that changes quickly is explained by fire...The visible duration: one minute. The observer, visually illuminated, carried away his vision in recollection – but not in the past – because the affective impression, the sensual image of the tablet of fire, became more and more present and increased in the visual memory.[66]

Figure 8 Yves Klein, *Feu*, 1961 © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2011.4

Klein's statement not only shows his interest in fire but makes clear that he had read Bachelard's *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, as he is quoting him[67] in order to highlight the strength and speed with which fire alters life. For the philosopher-scientist, fire is in our imagination and emotions. This approach is similar to that of Kounellis, who uses fire because of its flexibility of transformation, but as McEvelley correctly argues, "like Klein, Kounellis believes in a tradition of human, not supernatural events." [68] He admires and shares Klein's interest in incorporating archaic cultural elements in his art, such as, in this case, fire, but he brings in fire, and consequently alchemy, as a product of history that has its roots in Ancient Greece.

Other materials often associated to alchemy that Kounellis incorporates in his art are different dark metals such as lead and steel, just as the alchemists' goal was to prepare the philosopher's stone, endowed with the power of transforming metals into gold, the most precious of them all. Other than this ability, the stone, which was also known as the Elixir or Tincture, had the power of extending human life indefinitely. Later on, the belief that the

philosophers' stone could be attained by divine grace and favour led to the development of esoteric or mystical alchemy, resulting in the development of a system where the transformation of metals into gold acquired the symbolic meaning of the transformation of man into a superior being through the path of God and religion.[69] In 1944 Carl Gustav Jung published his *Psychology and Alchemy*, a study where he establishes a connection of alchemical symbolism to the psychoanalytical process, since the alchemist's ingredients have a psychological equivalent. He often emphasizes the importance of the alchemist's search for the philosopher's stone, which could transform base metals into gold and stands as a metaphor for the spiritual transformation of the self.[70] Although, Kounellis does not accept interpretations of his art relevant to Jung's theories,[71] his work still implies aspects of transmutation. For instance, his 2005 work exhibited at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh has been connected to alchemical transformation. In a large gallery room on the top floor of the museum, Kounellis had divided the space in half by a curtain of coloured fragments of Murano glass hanging from a metal beam (Figure 9). The natural light that entered the space through a window gave an "ethereal and spiritual quality," in contrast to the dark presence of *Untitled*, 1990, steel plates in the shape of an abstract triangle, whose one side is open with coal coming out and a paraffin lamp hanging above the coal. According to the organizers of the exhibition, with this work, the artist transforms base materials into pure spirit and enlightenment.[72] The dark steel and coal have, according to Kounellis, a long past – since they are connected to the industrial revolution, which established the foundations of modern life[73] – and by using them in his art he assures a past/history in the future.[74] This piece, which includes materials that on the one hand appear humble and poor and on the other have travelled a long way from the past to the present, can force the viewer to think that today's society needs to transform again from black opacity to translucency. And it is a hopeful work since the rays of natural light win over the dark effect of steel and coal, by creating a glint on the colourful fragments of glass, making the

viewer realize that there is a chance for ‘enlightenment’ and positive transformation.

Figure 9 Giovanni Kounellis, *Untitled*, 2005 © DACS, London 2011.

Figure 10 Giovanni Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1996 © DACS, London 2011.

Another work of Kounellis that has strong connections to alchemy is his *Untitled*, 1996, where we see pieces of coal placed on iron bases (Figure 10). The coal is wrapped in lead and only the top of each piece is slashed making the coal visible. This work brings to mind the alchemists’ fascination with lead, a base metal to be transformed into gold. In this work, we see coal emerging, which is an industrial material, a source of heat and a channel in which the alchemical fire can live. Coal, which Kounellis first exhibited on the floor of his studio in Rome in 1967, appears to be, according to Cora□:

one of his early manifestations, apart from distinctive sign of a “nigredo”, (a word to denote blackness, but as an alchemist’s term it means putridity and decomposition), prepared by Kounellis to mark the eschatological boundaries between a pre-existing linguistic and “representational” reality and a new notion of space, form and the linguistic faculty itself, which urged him to “represent” materially the real elements of his image.[75]

Here the alchemical action is that Kounellis with these real materials, lead and coal, breaks the given boundaries of painting and transforms the representation of materials to an actual presentation in a physical space altering as well the existing notions of space and form.

The use of lead and other metals can also be found in the works

of Beuys, who Kounellis deeply admires. Beuys, by including symbols of myth, alchemy and the occult, believed that “the imaginative powers of art” could change life, and bring a personal and social rebirth since Europe and especially Germany was “physically and psychologically devastated.”[76] He felt he had to adopt the role of the shaman in order to exorcise the horrors of the past. For instance, in Beuys’s *Terremoto*, 1981, we find a machine used for casting lead type around which blackboards with drawings of heads are propped (Figure 11). According to Anne Seymour:

they [the drawings] seem to suggest the aspect of spirituality and ecstasy, though they also perhaps depict mankind struggling through the darkness, strongly affected by shifting balance and continual upheavals of society. The machine which forms the central core of the sculpture, through the words it produces, appeals directly to the head. It could indeed be seen as a head in itself. However, it is also a sort of alchemical crucible. For the machine is used for casting lead type, that is to say, in following the alchemical metaphor, it is for transforming lead (or base consciousness) into gold (or enlightenment).[77]

Figure 11 Joseph Beuys, *Terremotto*, 1981 © DACS, London 2011.

The typesetting machine, which appeals to the drawn heads, produces words. Thus, this piece becomes a metaphor for energy and creativity that affects the humankind and the world.[78] In contrast to Kounellis’ art, many of Beuys’s sculptures are machine-like, including transmitters, transformers, batteries, magnets and telephones, which all involve a change of condition, ejection of energy and creativity. Kounellis’s art is not overall machine-like, since he is interested in exhibiting basic materials with strong symbolisms derived from tradition and the past. Ma-

terials, for him, are “lights” that enlighten the artist’s path.[79]

Mary Jane Jacob, discussing Kounellis’ retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Chicago in 1986, observed a number of works, in which objects were painted in gold, the result of the alchemists’ central quest. Included in the show were a felt hat crowned with a gold laurel wreath, gold-soled shoes lying upside-down and a pair of golden lips situated at the level of the viewer’s head. In these pieces the alchemical gold stands for “an element bestowed upon man” since the gold laurel wreath signifies “that today’s hero is the man or the artist;” the gold-soled shoes become an allegory of “the artist or man...[who] is the one who walks on sacred ground in the secular world;” and finally the golden lips indicate “the possible role of the artist as a prophet, though he cannot speak the truth yet.”[80] At the same time Jacob suggests that they symbolize the dreams of all the immigrants who went to America “where the streets are paved with gold” to find a better life. [81] The last work, with the golden pair of lips may also have a different meaning in relation to alchemy. The lips are the part of the head – the place where knowledge and spirit are living according to the alchemists[82] – where our thoughts and wisdom are transformed into words. This new interpretation is even more comprehensible in an earlier work of Kounellis (1972), where the artist has covered his lips with a golden mould (Figure 12). These “lips” pieces show that the man/artist has the responsibility to bring wisdom (gold) into the world, through his art, which serves as the means of expression; it is his words, his language.

Figure 12 Giovanni Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1972 © DACS, London 2011.

These “gold” pieces bring to mind Yves Klein’s monochrome gold paintings, which incorporate fine gold leaves on their sur-

face. Klein argues that the gold of the alchemists can be pulled out from anything and his goal was to pull out the charisma of the philosopher's stone that lives in us.[83] For him, gold is "associated with a myth of a golden age, or with some parallel sense of longing for the return or reconstitution of a past period that is conceived as perfect in comparison with flawed present." [84] His monogold works express his belief that a golden age lost in the past, according to Rosicrucianism, could be restored in the future. Kounellis' interest in gold is related to Klein's belief with the important difference that he uses it "within historical rather than a mythical framework." [85]

Figure 13 Giovanni Kounellis, *Untitled (Civil Tragedy)*, 1973 © DACS, London 2011.

Kounellis' *Civil Tragedy*, a hat and a coat on a hat-rack standing in front of a gold-leafed wall illuminated by an oil lamp, has been connected to alchemy because of the golden wall, even though it has been mostly associated to the gold background of Byzantine icons (Figure 13). In a conversation between Celant and Kounellis, the former noted that "the wall covered with gold leaves is converted into an ascent and in inviolability of artistic product, in the sense of an alchemical transformation of the creative energy." [86] The gold of the alchemists applied on the gallery wall signifies Kounellis' hope for a utopian future. In particular, when the work was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in Chicago, Jacob argued that its meaning was twofold: on the one hand, it was pessimistic as it talked of a historical moment, during the industrial revolution, when man hoped that technological progress would have a positive effect on the lives of the immigrants and generally on society; on the other hand, it carries a positive meaning that there will be a new society, based on humanism and rationalism, raised from the fragments of the past and then man would return for his hat and coat.[87] More generally this work, exhibited in other locations, becomes an expression of Kounellis' belief that a new society can be built by

looking back to the ruins and the symbols of our past.

Conclusion

What has become apparent from the beginning of this essay is not only the extent Kounellis' art is associated to alchemy but also that alchemy is for him a product of the past and a vehicle so as to address innovation and concerns of the present. Kounellis incorporates natural and simple materials associated to alchemy, which has a long history, and blends them with the innovations of his time. In general, by the repeated use of fire, dark metals and gold, Kounellis transforms them into vehicles of language, resulting in the creation of his own visual vocabulary. By having them exhibited as they are or in different combinations – creating hybrids or “something else” as he says[88] – without going through any major physical or technical alterations, in order to create real pictures, since, according to his personal view, he is a ζωγράφος,[89] a creator of pictures, where the surrounding space becomes his canvas and the materials his colours, Kounellis may suggest that in our days, where reality exists mostly in television, the website and magazines, “the search for the real itself has become utopian.”[90] By transforming basic materials into art, as an alchemist, he achieves an artistic reality with a poetic dimension.[91] As he has written, he desires “the return of poetry with all means: of practice, of observation, of loneliness, of the word, of the image, of the evasion.”[92]

Kounellis, through the blending of tradition and innovation, past and present, creates his own artistic identity and leaves his mark on the international art scene. He is not copying, mimicking or reproducing, but maintains that the novel is a fresh idea of the past and that the artist must become the master of this differentiation. His materials, carrying symbols and memories from alchemy and in general from the depths of history, become an outcry against the complexity of modern world, where globalisation does not leave enough room for the artist to manifest his distinctiveness.

Steve Pantazis completed a Ph.D. thesis on the art of Jannis Kounellis at the University of Manchester and recently, an interview with British artist Kit Craig has been published by Axis.

[1] Throughout the essay, I refer to Arte Povera's key materials as poor, humble, basic and everyday, similarly to curators, scholars and other experts on Arte Povera.

[2] As Postmodern art, I mean the art produced from the late-1950s, reaching its highest point in the 1960s, that reacted to the purist and formalist thinking of Modernism with a shift from the medium of painting to other forms of expression such as installation, performance, happenings and land art.

[3] Mieke Bal. Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 189.

[4] Kounellis, interviewed by the author at Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro, Milan, September 16, 2006.

[5] Göran Hermerén, *Influence in Art and Literature*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University, 1975, 321.

[6] Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta*, Milan: Bompiani, 1962, originally published in *Il Menabò di letteratura*, Turin, no. 5, 1962, 198-237. Published in English as *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cagnoni, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989, 3.

[7] In 2007, at the 33rd Annual Conference of the Association

of Art Historians, Nicholas Cullinan, a Ph.D. student working on Arte Povera, told me that when he interviewed Kounellis, the artist did not reject alchemical reading of his art.

[8] Interview at Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro, Milan.

[9] Quoted from a 1995 interview, in Aphrodite Georgiou, "Die Dimension der Vergangenheit im Werk von Jannis Kounellis," doctoral dissertation, University of Cologne, 1998, 54.

[10] Stephen Bann, Jannis Kounellis, London: Reaktion Books, 2003, 194.

[11] Kenneth Baker, "Jannis Kounellis and the Reenchantment of Contradiction," *Artforum* (USA), vol. 25, no. 6, Feb. 1987, 100

[12] Ibid.

[13] Andrew Causey, *Sculpture Since 1945*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, 153.

[14] Thomas McEvilley, "Mute Prophecies: The Art of Jannis Kounellis," Jannis Kounellis, exh. cat., Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986, 173.

[15] Interview at Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro, Milan.

[16] Jean Frémon, "Weight and measures," Jannis Kounellis, exh. cat., Paris: Galerie Lelong, 1989, 24.

[17] Gloria Moure, Jannis Kounellis: Works, Writings 1958-2000, Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2001, 65.

[18] Interview with White, 76.

[19] M.E. Warlick, "Magic, Alchemy and Surrealist Objects," in Elmar Schenkel and Stefan Welz, ed., *Magical Objects: Things and Beyond*, Berlin: Galda & Wilch Verlag, 2007, 1.

[20] Oxford English Dictionary Online, second edition, 1989, [www.oed.com/search?searchType=dictionary&q=tradition &_searchBtn=Search](http://www.oed.com/search?searchType=dictionary&q=tradition&_searchBtn=Search) (Online: August 16, 2011)

[21] T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, London: Methuen, 1940, 47-59.

[22] T.S. Eliot, ed., "Introduction," *Selected Poems by Ezra Pound*, London: Faber & Gwyer, 1928, x. Quoted in Fei-Pai Lu, *T.S. Eliot: The Dialectical Structure of His Theory of Poetry*, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1966, 68.

[23] Jannis Kounellis, *Στην πεδιάδα του Ιονίου: Διάλογοι του Γιάννη Κουνέλλη με τον Θανάση Λάλα και τον Βασίλη Βασιλικό* [In the Plain of the Ionian Sea: Conversations of Kounellis with Thanasis Lalas and Vasilis Vasilikos], Athens: Καστανιώτης, 1995, 131.

[24] Kristine Stiles, "Process," *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' writings*, Stiles and Peter Selz, eds., London: University of California Press, 1996, 585.

[25] For further reading *Global Village: The 1960s*, exh. cat., Canada: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2003; *Art & The 60s: This was Tomorrow*, exh. cat., London: Tate Britain, 2004; *Gene Anthony, Magic of the Sixties*, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 2004. This view is also expressed in the catalogue of the 2009 exhibition *Inspiration, Religion and Spirituality in Modern Art* organised by the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, where a work of Kounellis is exhibited among the works of Kandinsky, Klee,

Pollock, Malevich, Beuys, Klein, Kiefer, Penone and others.

[26] Anne Seymour, "Transformation and Prophecy," in Beuys, Klein, Rothko, exh. cat., London: Anthony d'Offay Gallery, 1987, 15.

[27] Maurice Tuchman, "Acknowledgments," in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, exh. cat., Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986, 13.

[28] In an interview conducted by Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," *Art News*, no. 65, September 1966, 59.

[29] Maurice Tuchman, "Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art," in *The Spiritual in Art*, 55.

[30] Germano Celant, "The Organic Flow of Life," Mario Merz, exh. cat., New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1989, 22.

[31] Germano Celant, "Arte Povera," (1969), republished in *Arte Povera/Arte Povera*, 119.

[32] Urszula Szulakowska, "The Paracelsian Magus in German Art: Joseph Beuys and Rebecca Horn," in Jacob Wamberg, ed., *Art & Alchemy*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2006, 178-9.

[33] *Ibid.*, 178.

[34] Germano Celant, "Futurism and the Occult," *Artforum*, no.19, January 1981, 35-43.

[35] Tuchman, "Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art," 40. Further information on the relation of these works to occult ideas and the 'invisible thing', see Giovanni Lista, "Futurist Photography," *Art Journal* 41, Winter 1981, 358.

[36] Szulakowska, 178.

[37] Kounellis, Στην πεδιάδα του Ιονίου, 74.

[38] McEvilley., 35.

[39] Ibid., 36.

[40] Ibid., 62.

[41] Stanislas Klossowski De Rola, *Alchemy: The Secret Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1973, 18.

[42] McEvilley, 62.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Jamey Gambrell, "Industrial Elegies," *Art in America*, Feb. 1988, 127.

[45] Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era: From the late 1960s to the early 1990s*, New York: Icon Editions, 1996, 108.

[46] Gaston Bachelard (1884- 1962), is one of the most important modern French thinkers. He wrote twenty-three books about the philosophy of science and the analysis of the imagination of matter. Information related to the subject of fire and alchemy can be found in his books *La Flamme d'une chandelle* (1961), and *La Psychanalyse du feu* (1940), and in Roch C. Smith's *Gaston Bachelard*, Boston: G. K. Hall & Company, 1982.

[47] Interview at Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro, Milan..

[48] Jon Thompson, "A Deadly Prescription," *Artscribe*, 88, September 1991, 60.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Andrew Forster, "Jannis Kounellis: Contradiction and Consolation," *Vanguard*, vol. 17, April/May 1988, Canada, 12 (10-14).

[54] Marc Scheps, *Jannis Kounellis: XXII Stations on an Odyssey 1969 – 2010*, London: Prestel Verlag, 2010, 29.

[55] Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1964, 7.

[56] Ibid., 83.

[57] Donald Kuspit, "Alive in the Alchemical Emptiness: Jannis Kounellis' Art," *C Magazine*, March 1988, Toronto, Ontario, 48.

[58] Helmut Draxler, "Das Brennende Bild," *Kunstforum International*, vol. 87, 1987, 114.

[59] McEvelley, 62.

[60] Mary Jane Jacob, "Introduction," *Jannis Kounellis*, exh. cat., Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986, 13.

[61] Seymour, 15.

[62] Thomas McEvelley, "Yves Klein and Rosicrucianism" in *Yves Klein*, exh. cat., Houston, Texas: Institute for the Arts,

1982, 239.

[63] Seymour, 16.

[64] Nan Rosenthal, "Assisted Levitation: The Art of Yves Klein," in Yves Klein, 114.

[65] Pierre Restany, Yves Klein, Belgium: Guy Pieters, 2000, 16.

[66] Rosenthal, 113.

[67] In particular, Klein quotes: "If all that changes slowly may be explained by life, all that changes quickly is explained by fire." Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, 7.

[68] McEvilley, "Mute Prophecies: The Art of Jannis Kounellis," 20.

[69] E.J. Holmyard, *Alchemy*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1957, 13-14.

[70] Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, translated by R.F.C. Hull, London: Routledge, 1968.

[71] Interview at Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro, Milan. The artist told me he had read Jung but his art is not influenced by his theories. This may happen because he explicitly rejects any connections of his art to that of the Surrealists. Also, he may keep his distance from Jung, since the psychoanalyst disliked James Joyce's literature, which Kounellis admires. See, Robert H. Deming, *James Joyce*, vol. 2, 1928-41, New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970, 583-84.

[72] Pamphlet of the exhibition Jannis Kounellis: Works 1958-2005, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, 2005.

[73] Kounellis, “Interview,”[interview by Franco Fanelli], *Il Giornale dell’arte*, January 24, 1989. In Jannis Kounellis in the Neue Nationalgalerie, exh. cat., Berlin: Neue National Gallerie, 2007, 34.

[74] Kounellis, *Στην πεδιάδα του Ιονίου*, 72.

[75] Bruno Cora □, “Kounellis: The Velocity of a (slow) Navigation,” in Jannis Kounellis, exh. cat., Athens: National Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004, 19.

[76] Sandler, 87.

[77] Seymour, 18.

[78] *Ibid.*, 20.

[79] Kounellis, *Στην πεδιάδα του Ιονίου*, 72.

[80] Mary Jane Jacob, “Kounellis,” in Gloria Moure, ed., *Kounellis*, Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa, 1990, 171.

[81] *Ibid.*

[82] C.G. Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, in *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, Vol. 14, 2nd edition, New Jersey, U.S.: Princeton Press, 1970, 435-6.

[83] McEvelley, “Yves Klein: Conquistador of the Void,” 45-46.

[84] McEvelley, “Mute Prophecies: The Art of Jannis Kounellis,” 35.

[85] *Ibid.*

[86] Germano Celant, “L’Epos Contemporanea,” in Kounellis, exh. cat., Milan: Padiglione d’Arte Contemporanea, 1992, 28. Also, Dieter Roelstraete connects this work to alchemy. See Dieter Roelstraete, Kounellis, exh. cat., Gent: S.M.A.K, Gent, 2002, 21.

[87] Jacob, “Kounellis,” 172.

[88] Interview at Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro, Milan, September 16, 2006.

[89] Kounellis, *Στην πεδιάδα του Ιονίου*, 126-7.

[90] Andreas Huyssen, “Memories of Utopia,” *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, (New York & London: Routledge, 1995), p. 101.

[91] Giuliano Briganti, “Kounellis,” Kounellis: *Via del Mare*, exh. cat., Amsterdam: The Stedelijk Museum, 1990, 77.

[92] Jannis Kounellis, “Untitled, 1987,” first published in *From the Europe of Old*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1987. In Moure, Jannis Kounellis: *Works, Writings 1958-2000*, 232.

Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan

Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan
(9 November 2011 – 5 February 2012, at the National Gallery, London)

‘Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan’ is the most complete display of Leonardo’s rare surviving paintings ever held. This unprecedented exhibition – the first of its kind anywhere in the world – brings together sensational international loans never before seen in the UK.

While numerous exhibitions have looked at Leonardo da Vinci as an inventor, scientist or draughtsman, this is the first to be dedicated to his aims and techniques as a painter. Inspired by the recently restored National Gallery painting, *The Virgin of the Rocks*, this exhibition focuses on Leonardo as an artist. In particular it concentrates on the work he produced as court painter to Duke Lodovico Sforza in Milan in the late 1480s and 1490s.

As a painter, Leonardo aimed to convince viewers of the reality of what they were seeing while still aspiring to create ideals of beauty – particularly in his exquisite portraits – and, in his religious works, to convey a sense of awe-inspiring mystery.

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Books reviewed

Weingarden, Lauren S. (2009), *Louis H. Sullivan and a 19th-Century Poetics of Naturalized Architecture*, London, UK: Ashgate Publishing Co. (ISBN: 978-0-7546-6308-9).

“For most of the twentieth century, modernist viewers dismissed the architectural ornament of Louis H. Sullivan (1856–1924) and the majority of his theoretical writings as emotional outbursts of an outmoded romanticism. In this study, Lauren Weingarden reveals Sullivan's eloquent articulation of nineteenth-century romantic practices – literary, linguistic, aesthetic, spiritual, and nationalistic – and thus rescues Sullivan and his legacy from the narrow role imposed on him as a pioneer of twentieth-century modernism. Using three interpretive models, discourse theory, poststructural semiotic analysis, and a pragmatic concept of sign-functions, she restores the integrity of Sullivan's artistic choices and his historical position as a culminating figure within nineteenth-century romanticism.

By giving equal weight to Louis Sullivan's writings and designs, Weingarden shows how he translated both Ruskin's tenets of Gothic naturalism and Whitman's poetry of the American landscape into elemental structural forms and organic ornamentation”.

Quoted material from the publisher's website

I am definitely not an architect neither an architectural historian; at least not yet. Nevertheless, as I have understood, from Lauren Weingarden's book *Louis H. Sullivan and a 19th-Century Poetics of Naturalized Architecture*, every time an architect is asked to design anything, one faces the problem of the one standing choice for the solution of the original problem.

The author moves forward to investigate and explain the particular decorative architectural design choices Sullivan had made in the different stages of his career providing all the necessary evidence every time, along with the contemporary reception of his work. But, in my view, the strongest point of this book is the fluent reconstruction of the "american" ruskian and post-ruskian environment into which Louis Sullivan – the philosopher and the architect, the father of skyscrapers and the father of modernism in architecture – was nourished and thus produced.

Apart from all of the above *Louis H. Sullivan and a 19th-Century Poetics of Naturalized Architecture* is clearly designed to correspond to the needs of both the advanced students of art history (in this case here "art" includes "architecture") and senior architectural historians of this particular era, and it is also appealing to the general public interested in the work of Louis H. Sullivan.

Books received

Dackerman, Susan ed. (2011), *Prints and the Pursuit of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe*, exhibition catalogue, Harvard Art Museums (09/06/11-12/10/11) and Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University (01/17/12-04/08/12), Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museums and Yale University Press (ISBN: 978-0300171075).

Next issue; The birth of art criticism

CFP: The birth of art criticism

Submission deadline 25 November 2011

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The proposed theme, but not limited to, is “The birth of art criticism”.

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What's the difference between art history and art criticism? When did art criticism start as a practise, as a concept, as an academic field of studies? An answer could clearly be along with the art. More, almost every "country" (represented by art historians in this case) for almost the same any reasons could promote a starting point for (both art and) art criticism. What are these reasons and which starting point can be linked to a certain art historian, how and why?

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